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December 19, 2024

PRESS RELEASE

CARICOM IMPACS convenes 3-day Gun Intelligence Workshop in SVG

December 19, 2024 – Kingstown: The CARICOM Implementation Agency for Crime and Security (CARICOM IMPACS) Crime Gun Intelligence Unit (CGIU) in collaboration with the Ministry of National Security, the Royal St. Vincent and the Grenadines Police Force (RSVGPF) and the United States Embassy in Barbados, convened a three (3) day Gun Intelligence Workshop in St. Vincent and the Grenadines (SVG) on Tuesday December 17, 2024.

An official opening ceremony was held in the National Insurance Services (NIS) Conference Room which was attended by several stakeholders from the Office of the Attorney General, the Police High Command, and others, members of the RSVGPF, the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), the Financial Intelligence Unit, Customs and Excise Department, Passport and Immigration Department, Port Authority, the Department of Civil Aviation among others.

During the ceremony, the Deputy Executive Director of the CARICOM Implementation Agency for Crime and Security (CARICOM IMPACS), Ms. Tonya Ayow provided a comprehensive update and background into the CGIU. She disclosed that the Council of Ministers for National Security and Law Enforcement (CONSLE) approved the unit's formation on October 06, 2022, with a mandate to consolidate firearms data and information, converting them into actionable intelligence that law enforcement can use to drive investigations and by extension, to bolster Member States capabilities to disrupt and dismantle illegal firearms networks. The unit is located at CARICOM IMPACS headquarters in Trinidad and Tobago.

According to the Deputy Executive Director, the CGIU was operationalised on 5th June 2023 and has been working with United States' agencies such as the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) to support Member States with firearms-related investigations. This collaboration she stated has led to enhanced coordination on several cases, resulting in formal investigations being launched in the United States of America and within several CARICOM Member States.

“Since the establishment of the Unit in 2023, we have seen significant benefits. There has been a marked improvement in collaboration with Member States on firearms-related events and investigations and enhanced coordination in handling cases. To date, the Unit has received approximately 82 firearms-related reports from Member States, and developed and disseminated

20 intelligence packages. Most recently, quick action by the CGIU, Member States, and U.S. partners have led to the detention of a suspect upon their return to the United States of America and the reopening of a previously dormant case. There continues to be an increase in the interception of firearms at U.S. Border points, and within CARICOM Member States, there is an increase in the number of port and inland seizures involving firearms, ammunition, magazines, and component parts. Member States have increased the number of Traces done on Firearms and there is greater information and intelligence sharing that is allowing all to identify the networks”, said Ms. Ayow.

Ms. Ayow underscored the point that the CGIU is staffed by seconded officers from across the region. She recalled that St. Vincent and the Grenadines was one of the first three countries that seconded an officer to start the Unit and commended Prime Minister Gonsalves for SVG’s full support of the unit. “The secondment programme, in general, has proven to be a key contributor to capacity building within the Region. Seconded officers, including those attached to the CGIU, acquire valuable skills at CARICOM IMPACS. Already, some officers have begun to distinguish themselves as skilled intelligence analysts and investigators. The officer from St. Vincent and the Grenadines was also a beneficiary of training at the ILEA in San Salvador where he received training on Port Investigations,” said the Deputy Executive Director.

Mr. Robert Marshall from Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) and, a representative of the United States Embassy in Barbados. He emphasised that since the Crime Gun Intelligence Unit (CGIU) was launched in 2023, it has become one of the most promising collaborative law enforcement efforts between the United States and CARICOM. He asserted that the United States is very proud to have funded the project through the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI) by investing over 2 million dollars (USD).

According to Mr. Marshall, the CBSI has helped to deepen the United States' security cooperation with SVG and other CARICOM countries. These countries he stated have made it abundantly clear that they are greatly concerned about the impact of firearms trafficking on their people. “Transnational criminal groups and drug traffickers continue to proliferate small arms and ammunition throughout the Caribbean, threatening our collective security, undermining our regional stability, and driving irregular migration”, said Mr. Marshall. He posited that the establishment of the (CGIU), enables law enforcement officers in CARICOM and the United States to work side by side to share information in real-time by positioning themselves to solve crimes, disrupt criminal networks, and trafficking rings and ultimately prosecute offenders in SVG or the United States.

The keynote address was delivered by Dr. Hon. Ralph Gonsalves, Prime Minister of St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Minister of National Security and Tertiary Education. He opined that to organise a 3-day gun intelligence workshop in a busy period such as Christmas, gives a sense of comfort to the general public in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and the region that CARICOM IMPACS considers the matter of violent crime, especially violent crimes committed by guns very seriously. The prime minister stated that when it comes to dealing with crime, the authorities must involve members of the public to win their confidence because anything less would make it difficult to implement certain programs to bolster law enforcement.

The Prime Minister adamantly stated they this region does not produce guns or ammunition and went on to further state that the majority of illegal guns in circulation in the region come from the United States. He stressed that based on the way the political situation is currently in the US Congress, that body is unlikely to enact legislation to strengthen the gun laws in the United States. Prime Minister Gonsalves continued “since it is unlikely that we're going to see any changes for American love for guns. We have to work together to try to stop the flow of those guns. It would be wonderful if they could control it better internally. We have to talk about how we could control the movement of guns between the United States and ourselves. We have to have effective border

control but it is very difficult given the number of islands and points where people can enter illegally. This calls for better detection facilities at our ports of entry because the guns come with cocaine and marijuana.”

Touching on the issue of crime and poverty. Prime Minister Gonsalves espoused the view that poverty is not a root cause of crime. He said that many choose to commit crimes by choice. On the issue of ‘gangs’ in SVG, the prime minister said “I know across the Caribbean there are some impositions of categories from outside about gangs. Well, I call them in the Vincentian context, ‘associational groupings’ because I don’t see in our own context, the kind of gangs like ‘Dudus’ in Jamaica with a hierarchy and certain penalties internally.

The prime minister lamented that to put a dent in crime, there must be a holistic approach by different stakeholders, including the family, the state, churches, communities, police, schools, NGO’s , the media, and others. Dr. Gonsalves also called for serious reforms in the way the Royal St. Vincent and the Grenadines Police Force (RSVGPF) conducts investigations and operations to boost arrests and prosecution of criminals.

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